

The Third Row

It was a Monday evening in a large Connecticut industrial city. The church, of which Clinton was a member, was scheduled, through a Gospel team, to hold a service at the Rescue Mission. Clinton was sitting on the platform, together with the others, watching the men wearily file in, and take their seats with dull mechanical motion.

The service was about to begin. My friend Clinton sat watching those men, as they listlessly opened their hymn-books. His eyes ranged about the crowd, as the first song was given out. And then . . . then, with the striking of the first note, he happened to glance at the third row. And there, against the side wall, last seat in the row, right side, he noticed him . . .

Perhaps it was because he had never seen him before. Most of the men he knew, but not this chap. He was young, good-looking and almost well-kept. But his face was thin, and extremely pale, almost chalk-white. And those eyes, deep-set, kept wandering about the room, seeming to grope for something, for anything. . . . Occasionally they would close, and the frame would sway slightly. Probably sick from drink! . . . But then, the eyes would open and carry on that strange wandering, groping. . .

Clinton could not get him out of his mind. During the whole of the service, it seemed that he could not pry his eyes from the pale, sheet-white face. And those eyes that wandered so! And when it came Clinton's turn to give a testimony, he could not help it—he found himself staring right at the chap, speaking just to him. And somehow the young man did not seem to resent it. Indeed, it appeared he almost welcomed the direct attention! He seemed to be really listening, deep inside, and those eyes ceased their strange wandering, for the period, and fixed themselves squarely upon him.

The service was over, now, and Clinton felt the clear, almost overpowering urge of breaking through the crowd, to get to the strange, pale chap; to just get him into a seat; to wrap an arm around his poor shoulder, and tell once again, the old, old story of Jesus and His wonderful love. . . .

My friend paused, and looked at me, a deep tear-film welling in the eye, and a sob in the whisper. "But Ed—I didn't do it. I didn't break through, and lay hold of him. I don't remember how it came about, but I do remember that when I looked around, a deep ache and chill came into my heart. He was gone—gone downstairs with the rest of those weary men, to sign up for the night . . ."

It was about a four-mile drive from the Mission to Clinton's home. A light rain was falling, and a wisp of fog to trail with it. He was alone in his car, and found himself driving slower and slower. And the patter of rain seemed to be saying, "Go back . . . go back . . ." But of course, no one was admitted downstairs, while the men were signing up . . . Yet, the sound kept running over and over, "Go back . . . go back . . . go back . . ."

And with a sob in his throat, Clinton finally swung the car around. He found himself crying aloud, "Dear Lord, please forgive me. I know I should have. But please, Lord, let me get to him somehow—even if it is against the rules of the place!"

And then—he heard it, directly behind him. The sobbing rise and fall of the sound of a siren! And then—he saw it. A wedge of red light cutting a lane through the rain and fog, and then, the figure of the white car as it sped past him.

The sight of that white car sent a chill coursing through Clinton—a chill which only increased as he neared the Mission, and became full-flood, as he saw the white car halt before the Mission door. He pulled up behind

slowly, and got out. A group of men were standing in the doorway, in the circle of the overhanging light. And there was the Superintendent coming through now.

He spied Clinton almost upon the instant. And strange, but he seemed to know what my friend wanted. In the range of light, Clinton could see the "super" gazing at him sadly.

"Too bad, Clinton, but you're too late. I saw you looking at him during the meeting. And I saw the way he looked at you, too. It should have been then, Clinton, just then. Because—well, you'll see in a moment. . . ."

A sound from behind the doorway, and the men gave way. The "super" flattened himself against the wall, and motioned Clinton alongside. Two men in white appeared, with a stretcher between. Clinton bent low, as they passed, and caught his breath. It was he, the pale face now really white. The eyes no longer wandering, groping, searching, but closed forever. It was the chap from third row, right, going out from his last Mission meeting . . .

Clinton heard one of the ambulance attendants whisper to the Superintendent: "Looks clear enough to me. 'Acute alcoholism,' as the book says. Always gets 'em in the end. . . ."

And then, the stretcher appeared through the rear mouth of the white car, and there was the slamming of the door. The attendant came back, with a paper in his hand. "Just sign here, for him, Harry. I'll make out the rest at the station. . . ." He grunted. "Always room for one more on the slab . . ."

And for a long, long moment my friend Clinton stood there, long after the ambulance had gone, long after the men about the doorway had gone back inside. He was quite soaked by the rain, but somehow never knew nor felt. Then he was finally aware of the Superintendent's hand upon his arm.

"I know it's hard to face it, Clinton. And I suppose we all fail in this way, at some time. But maybe that's the way the Lord works it out, to really wake us up—who knows? It's like some of these boys, in a way. Have to dash ice-cold water on them to make them snap out. Maybe that's what the Lord is doing to you, right now, Clinton. Looks that way, from your face, as I see it here. And I know it hurts. But we all need it, now and then. . . ."

And then, Clinton was alone. The "super" had gone back inside, to his men, to those who were still . . . alive. And somehow, he was glad that he was alone. He was getting a terrific beating . . . 'way deep inside. With slow, slow steps, he retraced his way to the car, more or less staggered into the seat, and then with a tearing sob buried his face against the wheel . . .

Remember what Paul said?—"Be instant in season, out of season." And listen! "Instant" means "instant"—not just "interested" . . . never forget it!—Gospel Herald

IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

An old minister of a small church in a country town had one day in his audience a very distinguished statesman. To the surprise of the congregation the service went on as usual, and the old minister preached with his accustomed earnestness and plainness of speech.

At the close of the service several members of the congregation gathered about him and asked:

"Did you notice that we had a distinguished visitor today? Why, that was a member of the cabinet, but you did not seem to be at all embarrassed."

Thereupon the old man replied, "I have been preaching in the presence of Almighty God for forty years, and do you think that, with him as one of my constant hearers, any man can embarrass me by his presence?"

—Evangelical Visitor.